I would like to thank Mr Algeo, the Chair of the RB Executive Committee for his comprehensive report of the activities of the Representative Church Body for 2022. Henry has covered some of the important technical aspects of the work of the RCB including fund performance, the allocation of income, and the services provided. I would like to focus on some of the aspects of the work of the RCB that particularly impacts on parish life.

But first, I should introduce myself, my name is Rev. Nicola Halford, I am the rector of Enniscorthy and Monart Union of parishes, in the beautiful county of Wexford and the wonderful dioceses of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory. I am the diocesan clerical representative on the Representative Body, and I am a recent RB appointee to the Church of Ireland Theological Institute Governing Council and St. Patrick’s Cathedral Board.

While preparing for this seconding speech, I was reminded of the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, which begins in verse 11 with:

“Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelist, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.”

I wonder if Paul was writing this letter to the Church of Ireland today, would he have expanded on the list of roles referred to in verse 11, and maybe he would have added property managers, lawyers, accountants, safeguarding advisors?

The context for the early church and the context in which we find ourselves in the Church of Ireland, is so radically different. Paul, for all the challenges he had to face in establishing the governance of the early church, did not have to deal with charities regulation, litigation, or the maintenance of historical buildings.

I often think back to my student days in CITI when my rose-tinted glasses were firmly in place. That romantic idea of George Herbert’s country parson was where I was aiming for. This was not helped by the fact that in my early days of my curacy in Wexford union I was reminded by parishioners about a previous rector who liked to do his visiting on horseback, the inestimable and much-loved Canon Brandon of Folksmills. And so, I found myself wondering if I should take up horse riding?

Then the reality of being a curate to 9 churches in the Wexford Union of Parishes hit me and I found myself wondering if I should get my helicopter’s licence instead?

And so, as I said, the context of the early church was much different to our present day, but there is also radical difference to the church that we were just 50 years ago. I know that the issues of compliance has been mentioned numerous times over our two, in-person days in Whites hotel but there really has been a tidal wave of office work connected to GDPR, Charities regulations, Heritage regulations, Safeguarding measures and so much more.

This is where the work of the RCB can really assist us on a parochial level.

While parish ministry, to a certain extent, is unique and self-contained, each parish is also part of a bigger whole, both diocesan and church wide, which raises two questions, firstly what services should be provided centrally, and secondly how connected should we be as an all-island church.

Let me consider the connectedness of our churches, as I have illuded to earlier, all our churches are subject to similar charities regulation, safeguarding policies, data protection regulations. Therefore, it would seem appropriate that resources are prepared centrally to facilitate a consistent standard and approach to dealing with parish compliance. I am grateful for the resources provided by the RCB much of which is available on the Parish Resources section of the Church of Ireland website. I am also appreciative of the training that I understand will be provided throughout the island over the coming months to ensure that we are able to apply these resources. My select vestry recently joined together for a trustee training session via zoom with Janet Maxwell. We gathered in the usual way and joined the zoom on one computer with the picture projected on the wall. The training was very easy to follow and eased many of my parishioners concerns about what they were being asked to do.

I am sure that many of you, like myself, were blown away by the presentation on Friday afternoon from the young people of Mullingar who urged us, the decision-making body of the Church of Ireland, to be proactive about climate change. We must be exemplary stewards of this beautiful, God given world. As the young people alluded to, we are in a code red for our planet and we must act now as a church body, taking measures to minimise the impact on the environment and minimising the effects of climate change. I am glad to see the new RCB climate change policy in this year’s book of report with its focus on four areas, energy usage, transport, waste and biodiversity. As we tackle climate change and other complex challenges, we will require central guidance and the opportunity to share local/parish experience.

The second question was, if we recognise the need to develop central resources, then what services should be provided centrally? Here, I would like to draw your attention the summary of the RB Executive Committee strategy which was developed during 2022. One of the most important statements in the Executive Committee strategy is to define the mission of the ‘trustees’ to support the mission and ministry of the Church of Ireland. It may seem obvious, but what this means is that the RCB strategy should be aligned to the diocesan strategies and also to parish strategies. The RCB is there to support the mission of parishes, and that should form the basis for the services provided by the RCB.

While most of us are aware of the property grants provided by the RCB, of the advice in relation to property management, clergy payroll and pension administration; this year’s report also includes reference to some parish mission grants including those for Ukrainian, and mental health initiatives. I am grateful for the allocation of financial resources to support the grassroot mission of parishes. I am also aware of the RCB funding for youth work and its funding of a children’s and families worker.

As a member of St. Patrick’s Cathedral Board, it is encouraging to see the work that is being done in St. Patrick’s and many of our cathedrals across our island, there has been much rebuilding following the restrictions of Covid-19. The RCB provided much needed financial support to cathedrals with choral traditions when the usual streams of revenue dried up so suddenly. These Cathedrals are such important parts of our heritage in the Church of Ireland and it is wonderful to see them thriving once more.

As I look to the services that may be provided by the RCB in the future I can only see an increased role for the RCB, in its support of Pioneer Ministry, Chaplaincy, clergy wellbeing and those missional opportunities that will develop in the years ahead. It is quite likely that in 50 years’ time there will be another clergyperson giving this speech and waxing lyrical about what the church was like back then, or as my 6yr old likes to say, in the olden days.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who serve on the Representative Body and its committee and to the staff of the RCB for their support of the dioceses and parish missions.

I commend this report to you and I second its adoption.